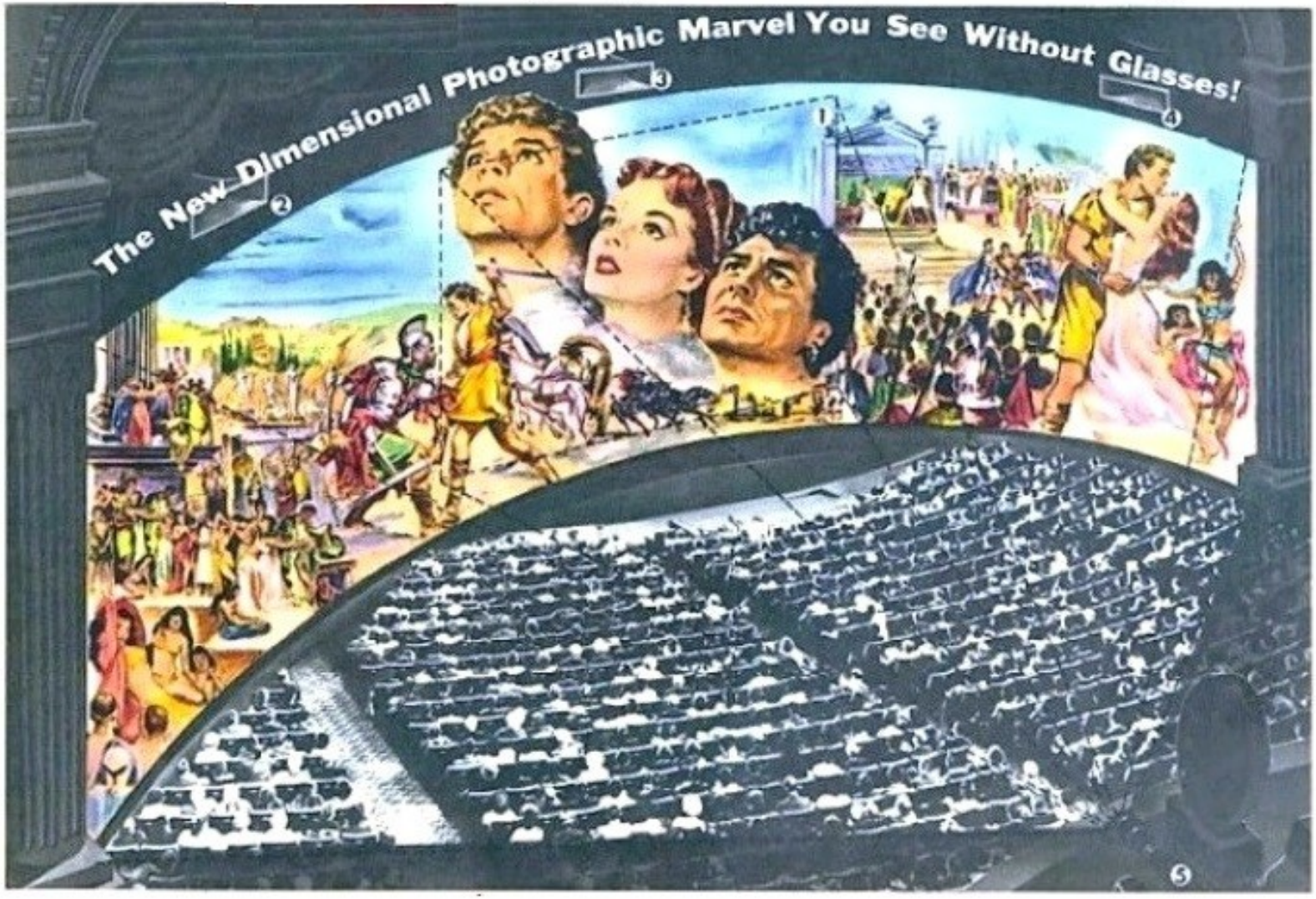
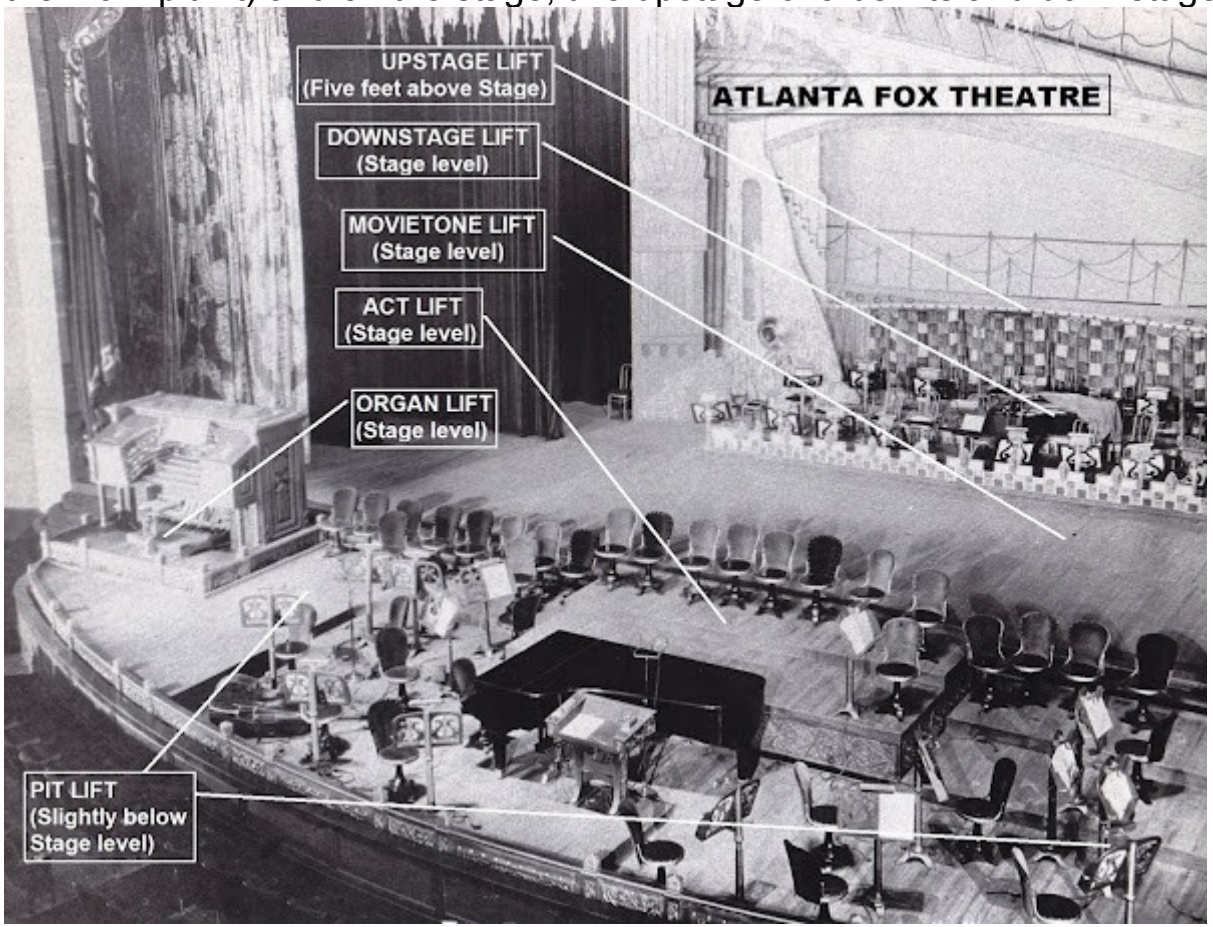
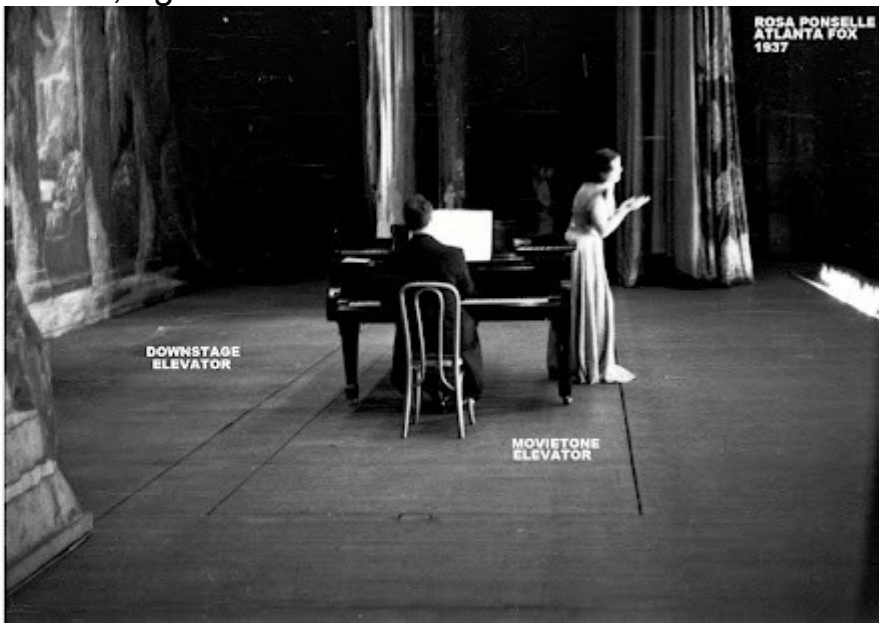
HOW THE MOVIETONE LIFT HELPED TO SAVE THE FOX



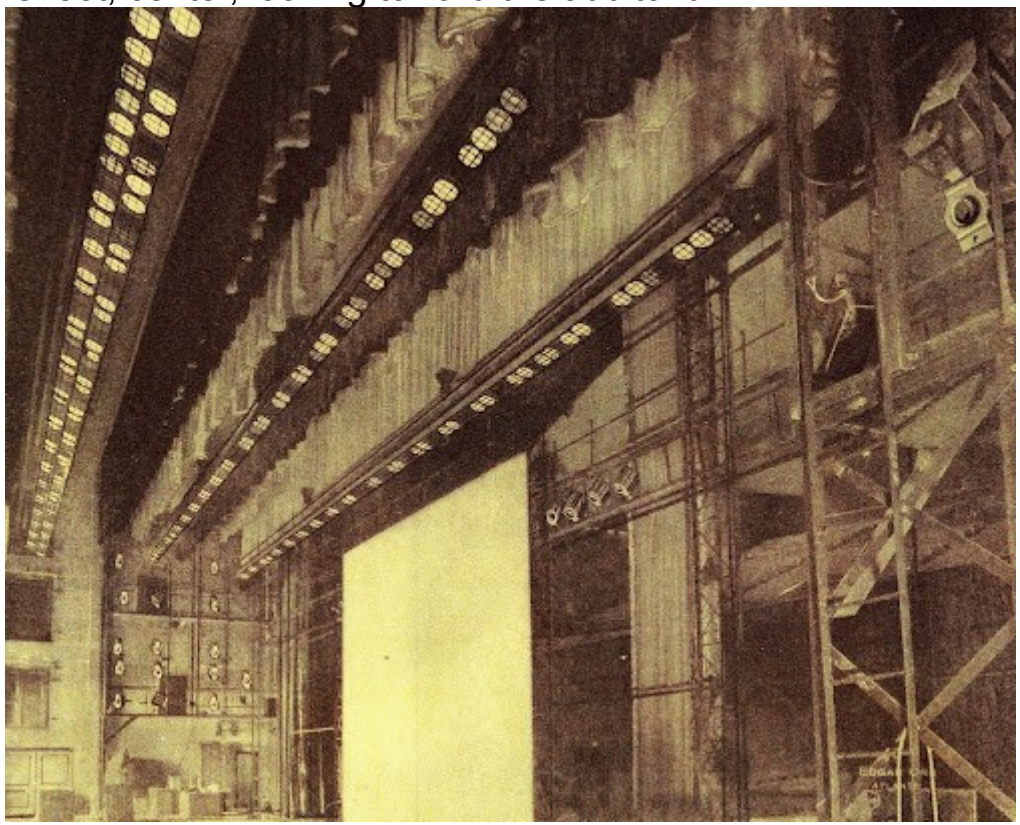
The Atlanta Fox (1929) was and is equipped with six Peter Clark stage elevators-- three in the orchestra pit (the organ, the act lift, and the main pit lift) and on the stage, two upstage chorus lifts and downstage, the Movietone lift.



Movietone, located directly behind the picture sheet (left), had originally contained the Western Electric sound horns and would rise up 17 feet from the stage deck to bring them level with the balcony. To clear the stage for live shows, the picture sheet would fly out and the Movietone lift would drop into the basement, bringing the top flush with the stage, such as for a 1937 concert given by Rosa Ponselle, right.



A view of the original picture sheet, center, looking toward the auditorium.



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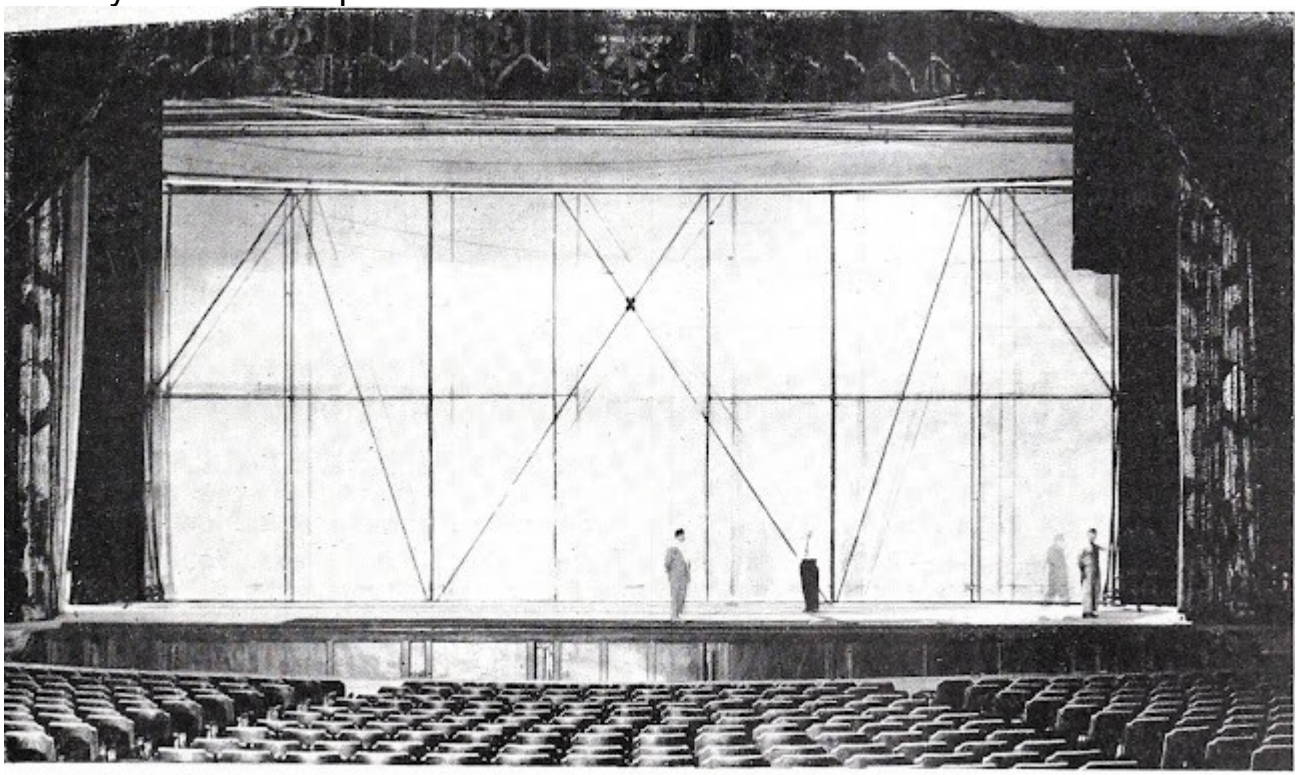
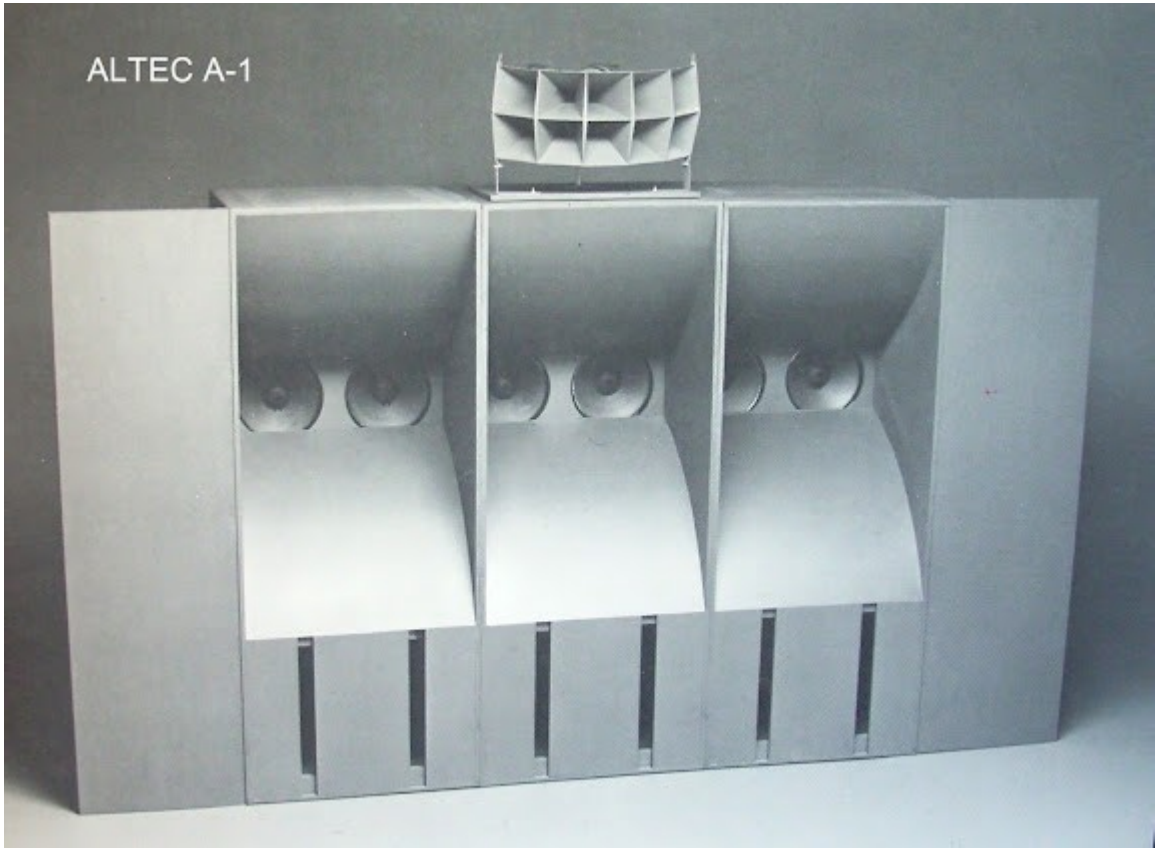
In 1953 when CinemaScope was introduced, the small flat picture sheet was replaced by a massive curved tubular steel frame, 69 feet wide and 28 feet high, which did not fly. The center of the new frame sat on the Movietone lift, which was left permanently in the down position.



A Raytone wide-screen frame has been installed at the Fox theatre in Atlanta as shown above.

Motion Picture Herald 1/09/1954

For the requisite three-track stereo, the Movietone horns were retired and was replaced by three giant Altec Voice of the Theatre A-1 cabinets, which sat on the deck behind the picture sheet. The center horn, shown here, also sat partially astride the Movietone lift.



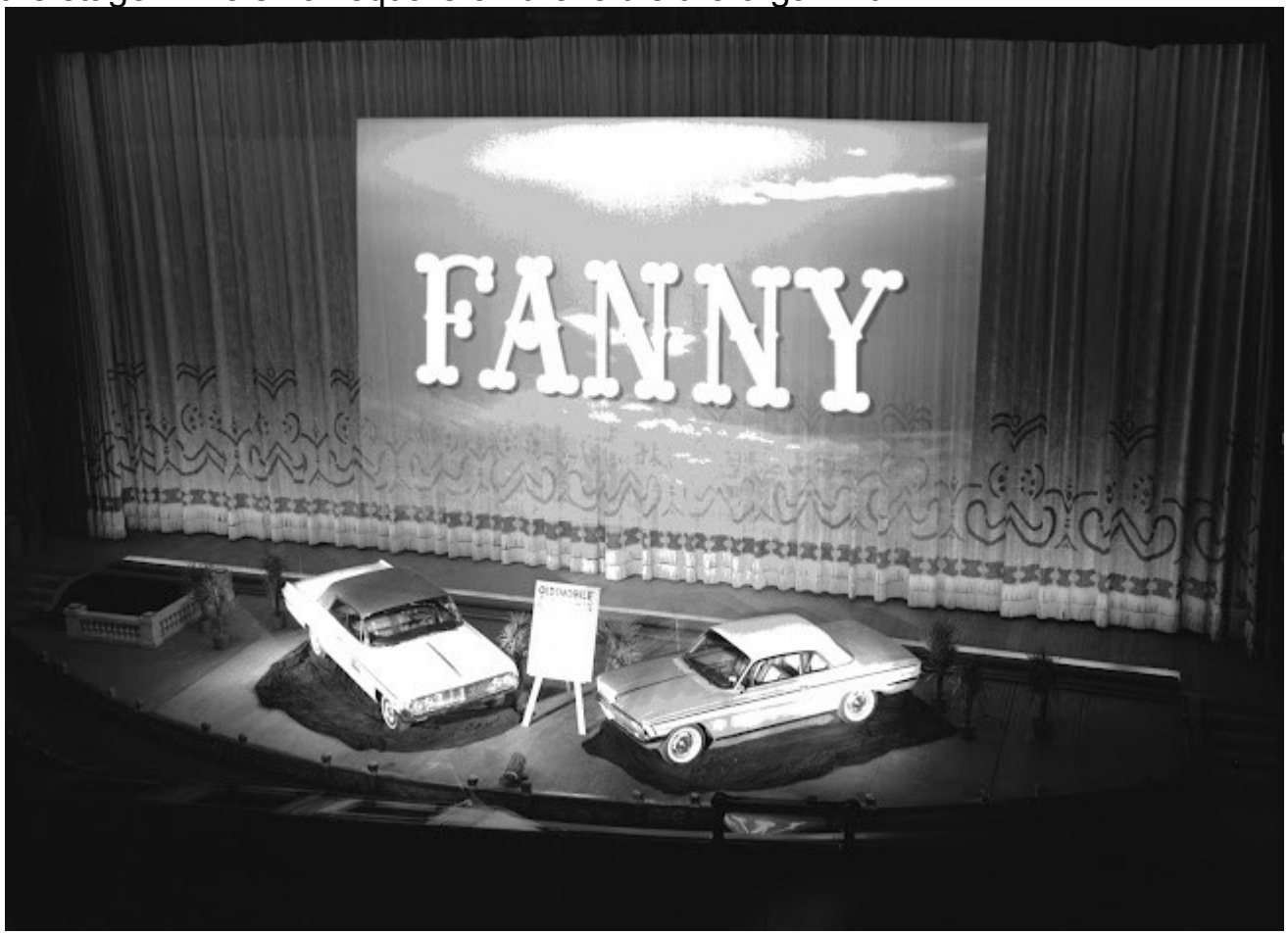
Before CinemaScope, the Fox stage was occasionally used for live performances, so long as they didn't interfere with their immensely profitable movie business. Below a free Sunday afternoon concert given by the Atlanta Pops in August, 1949.

After CinemaScope, when acts like Martin & Lewis or Elvis Presley were booked, they would play downstage of the main traveler curtain. Bands from Georgia Tech and other local schools, such as the Northside Highlander Elementary Concert Band (below), would be invited to perform at the Fox on the weekends, dramatically rising on the pit elevator, bathed in the brilliant arc light from the projection booth.

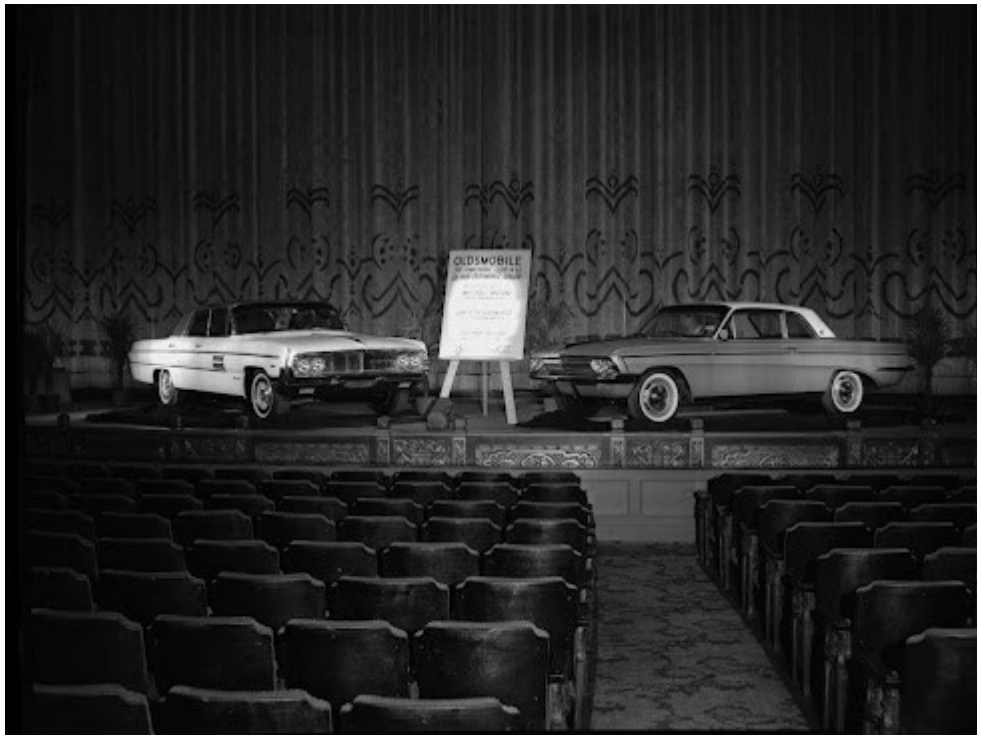
Atlanta Constitution 1/20/1955

DORIS DAY AND FRANK SINATRA!
TOGETHER FOR THE FIRST TIME! TERRIFIC FROM THE FIRST MOMENT!
"Young at Heart"
WARNER BROS. present it in WARNERCOLOR
DORIS AND FRANK SING 'EM AS ONLY THEY CAN! 'You My Love' 'Til My Love Comes To Me' 'One For My Baby' 'Hold Me In Your Arms' 'Ready Willing And Able' 'Someone To Watch Over Me' 'Young At Heart' 'There's A Rising Moon' 'Just One Of Those Things'
Extra!
ON THE STAGE
FRI.-SAT. NIGHTS, 9:15 P. M.
Northside Highlander Elementary Concert Band
70—PIECES—70
Directed by Mrs. Ben Logan Sisk
The Fabulous
STARTS TOMORROW
FOX
PRICES
Matinee 60c
Night 75c
Children 25c

In addition to local bands, the pit was used several times for unveiling new Oldsmobiles between movies, like during the run of the movie "Fanny" in August 1961. "Fanny" was not shot in CinemaScope, explaining why the projected image does not fill the stage. The small square on the left is the organ lift.

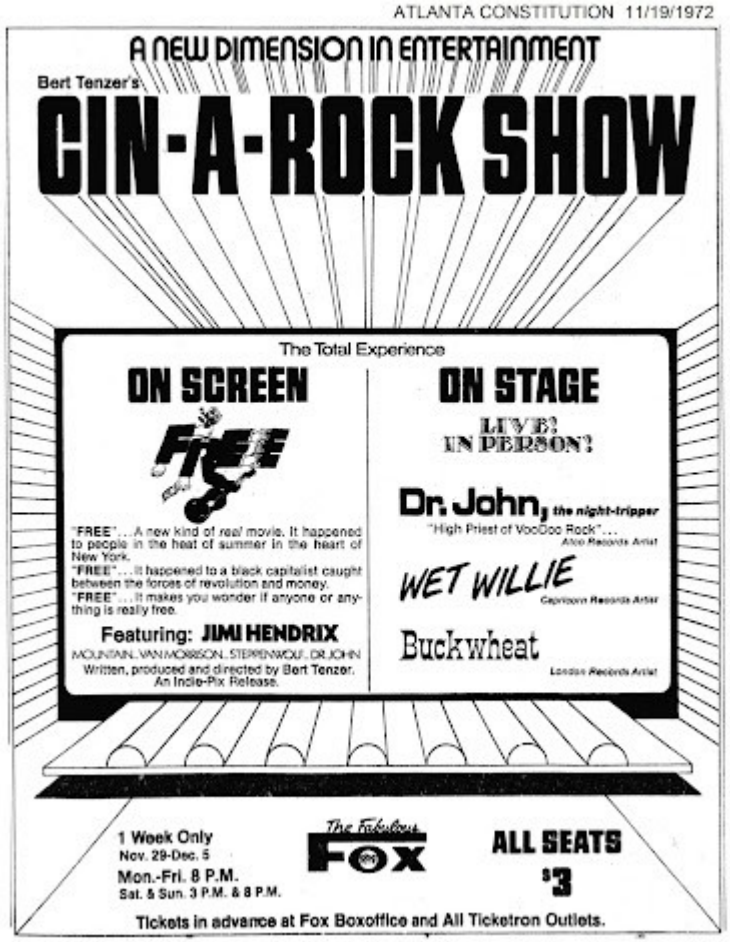


A close view of the large pit.



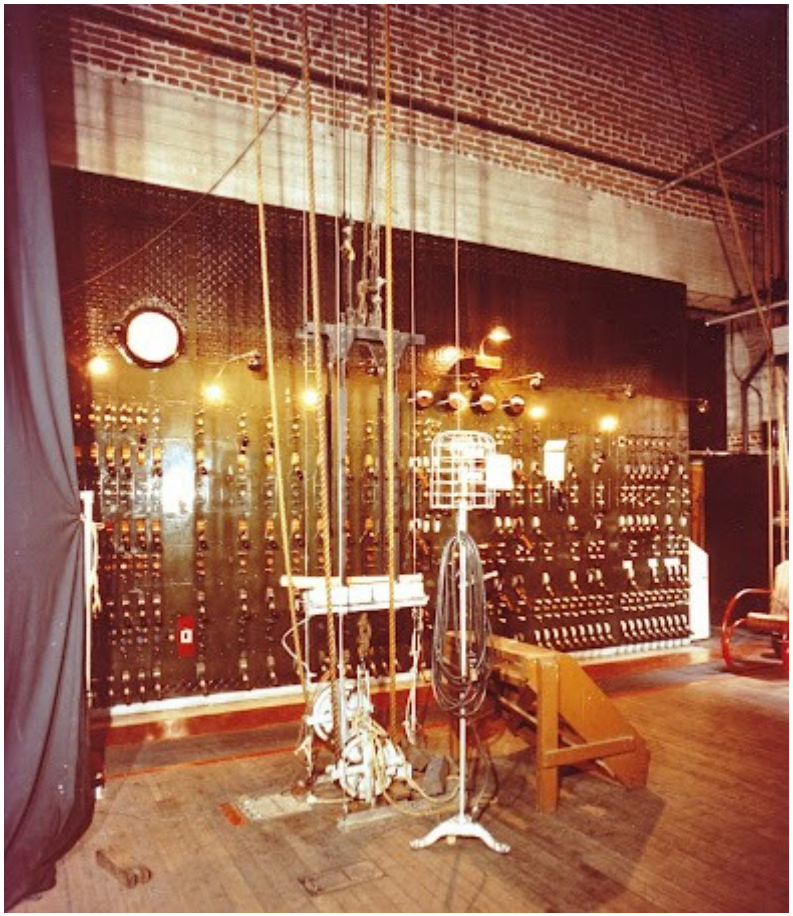
The only time the full stage was put to use was for the week-long spring tour of the Metropolitan opera, and to clear the stage for that, the Fox would truck the three Altec horns offsite, and a team of IATSE stagehands would drag the towering sheet frame to the upstage wall and hoist it away on the Peter Clark motorized set originally intended for the hard cyc, which had been removed. In this view of the upstage half of the stage, borderlights No. 3 and 4 can be seen above, the upstage chorus lift is at "top" position, and an army of stage braces hang above the crossunder stairway.

After 1968, the Met quit the Fox for the new city auditorium, and from then on, the frame was "immovable." In November 1972, when things were starting to look bleak for the Fox, manager George Deavours rented the house out for Cin-a-Rock, a week of midnight rock shows with Dr. John and Wet Willie, playing on the huge pit elevator, and they were a hit.


ATLANTA CONSTITUTION 11/19/1972
A NEW DIMENSION IN ENTERTAINMENT
Bert Tenzer's
CIN-A-ROCK SHOW
The Total Experience
ON SCREEN
FREE
"FREE"...A new kind of real movie. It happened to people in the heat of summer in the heart of New York.
"FREE"...It happened to a black capitalist caught between the forces of revolution and money.
"FREE"...It makes you wonder if anyone or anything is really free.
Featuring: JIMI HENDRIX
MOUNTAIN...VAN MORRISON...STEPPENWOLF...DR. JOHN
Written, produced and directed by Bert Tenzer.
An Indie-Pix Release.
ON STAGE
LIVE! IN PERSON!
Dr. John, the night-tripper
"High Priest of VooDoo Rock"...
Atco Records Artist
WET WILLIE
Capricorn Records Artist
Buckwheat
London Records Artist
1 Week Only
Nov. 29-Dec. 5
Mon.-Fri. 8 P.M.
Sat. & Sun. 3 P.M. & 8 P.M.
The Fabulous FOX
ALL SEATS
$3
Tickets in advance at Fox Boxoffice and All Ticketron Outlets.

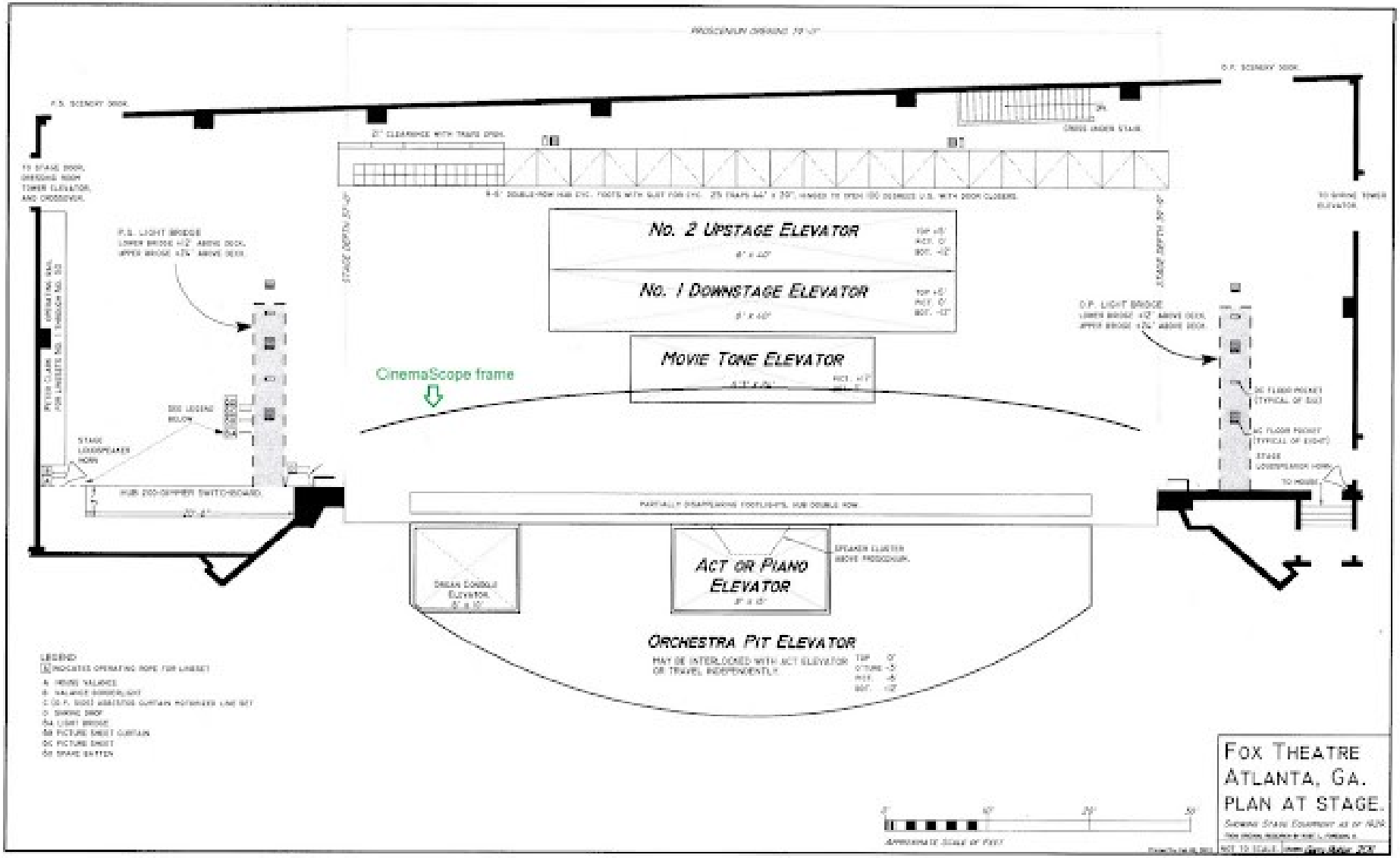
We fans of the Fox wanted somehow to regain use of the full stage, so to really show off the theatre-- but that seemed an impossible dream. How it eventually happened was a funny story-- in retrospect.

It was the custom each night, after the last film showing, for the two-man IA house crew, Sam and Rags, to press the button which closed the motorized traveler curtain; raise the houselights on the slow motion wheel of the Hub switchboard; and after five minutes or so, they would hit the push button at the stage manager desk to bring the orchestra pit lift up from the basement to stage level and juice the ghost lamp which lived upon it. Because the picture sheet frame and the three horns were shrouded by impenetrable full-height black velours, the stagehands worked blind. The black masking can be seen to the left of the Hub switchboard.



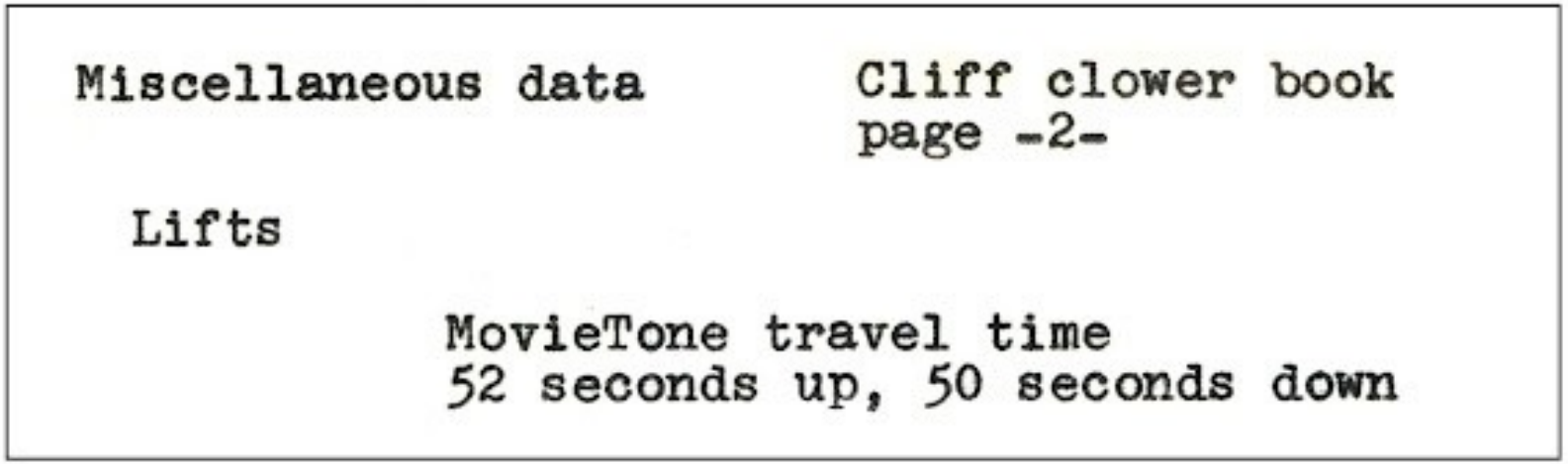
One night, soon after the Cin-a-Rock show, the stagehands inadvertently hit the push button for the long-dormant Movietone lift instead of the pit, and unaware of the mistake, walked off to their dressing room to get ready to go home. The first inkling that anything was wrong was when the projectionist, just arriving in the balcony from the booth, heard an ear-splitting KABOOM! down on the stage, and he thought it was a bomb.

What actually had happened was that Movietone, slowly and silently creeping upwards, had picked up the front edge of the half-ton Altec center horn and thrown it onto its back. A plan view of the stage, courtesy Garry Motter, showing the curved screen frame in relation to the Movietone lift, upon which also sat the center horn (not shown).



The projectionist rushed back up to the house phone and called the stagehands, who ran onstage to discover the worst of the damage: Movietone had also picked up the gigantic picture sheet frame and crushed IT against the top of the proscenium arch.

All in fifty-two seconds.



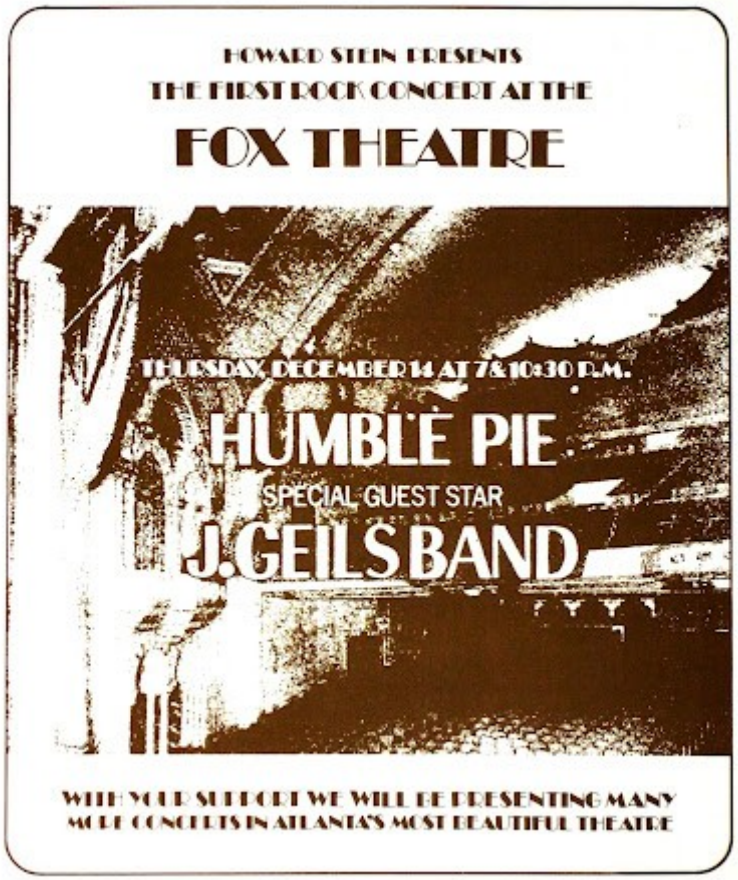
Miscellaneous data Cliff clower book
page -2-

Lifts

MovieTone travel time
52 seconds up, 50 seconds down

After informing management of the sad state of affairs, Sam and Rags phoned and woke up the IA business agent, who at midnight summoned a sleepy work crew down to the Fox. Gingerly, they lowered Movietone and the wrecked frame but found that by some miracle, the picture sheet itself was unharmed. Working through the night, they cut the frame up into scrapyard-size pieces, hung the picture sheet on a system pipe, and set the undamaged horn back on its feet. By the time of the noon matinee, the place was back in shape, and no one out front was wise to the near-disaster.

The best news was that the stage was finally clear for live performance, and on December 14, 1972, Humble Pie and the J. Geils Band played the first onstage rock show at the Fox, introducing the Moorish atmospheric movie palace to an entirely new audience.



During 1973 and 1974, while the Fox was still a movie house, a total of twenty-eight live shows played, including David Bowie, America, Procol Harum, Johnny Winter, Steve Miller, Blue Oyster Cult, Frank Zappa, Greg Allman, James Taylor, Mountain, Billy Joel, Todd Rundgren, Dickie Betts, Manfred Mann, and Count Basie. The great majority of the attractions were presented by Alex Cooley.

When the Fox was shut down and slated for demolition three years later, it was saved in large part by the rockers who knew the Fox was too good to lose.

And that is how Peter Clark's Movietone elevator helped to save the Fox.

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This 1975 Mitch Deutsch photo taken upstage left shows the A-1 horn that toppled, now mounted on wheels. The Fox scenery door is to the left and the cyc footlight traps are in the left foreground.

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September, 2023